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Beauty and the Patriarchal Beast: Gender Role Portrayals in Sitcoms Featuring Mismatched Couples

By Kimberly R. Walsh, Elfriede Fürsich, and Bonnie S. Jefferson



Carrie (Leah Remini) and Doug (Kevin James) in a scene from a 2006 episode of *The King of Queens*. Photo courtesy of Photofest.

Abstract: A number of recent situation comedies on U.S. television depict smart, witty, and attractive women who are married to inept, overweight, and immature men. This textual analysis examines two examples of this type of show, *The King of Queens* (1998–2007) and *According to Jim* (2001–07), and compares them to older sitcoms. These shows discursively maintain patriarchy by consistently employing two contradictory story lines: the first positions women as physically and intellectually superior to their husbands, and the second restrains feminist ideals while reaffirming male dominance. The study demonstrates how contradictions within the narrative elements of plot, characterization, and setting sustain a repressive gender constellation. This textual structure, the humor of the show, and the popular myth of beauty and the beast work together to encourage viewers to accept patriarchy as a “natural” male trait and trivialize sexism as a laughing matter.

Keywords: feminist criticism, gender, narrative, representation, situation comedy

“Lucy, you’ve got some ‘splainin’ to do!” was a familiar phrase for many television viewers in the 1950s. A typical *I Love Lucy* episode revolves around Lucy (Lucille Ball) doing something ridiculous and trying to hide it from her husband, Ricky (Desi Arnaz). Most times, he finds out about her scheme and

shouts something along the lines of, “Lucy, how could you be so stupid?” In that decade, it was not surprising to see a woman on television having to answer to her husband. While watching television today, however, viewers are more likely to see a wife finding out about one of her husband’s schemes and yelling at him for being stupid. A number of recent situation comedies depict smart, witty, and attractive women who are married to inept, overweight, and immature men. As *New York Times* critic Richard Marin observes, “[A]ll family sitcoms—virtually all sitcoms now—are about a fat guy with a hot wife” (2). Citing several examples, from *The King of Queens*, *Family Guy*, and *According to Jim* to the short-lived *Still Standing* and *Listen Up*, he writes about the male characters, “[T]hey’re not just fat. They’re lazy beer-and-TV slobs who never lift a finger around the house, have barely met their kids and think an emotion is something you only express on the Back Nine” (2). Marin leaves an important question unanswered—“Whose fantasy of the American family is this: men’s, women’s or both?” (2). Here is where this analysis begins. What gender ideology is presented in these sitcoms? Why do we find these gender constellations funny?

This study takes a closer look at the gender portrayals in *The King of Queens* (1998–2007) and *According to Jim* (2001–07), two typical examples of this genre. While the apparent role reversal suggests that the wives on the shows represent liberated women, a detailed analysis renders a more problematic reading: this type of sitcom actually reinforces the same patriarchal ideology reflected by *I Love Lucy* more than fifty years ago.

This gendered narrative analysis explains how contradictions within the plot, characterization, and setting of the two sitcoms make the shows appear to depict nontraditional gender roles even while they reinforce patriarchal ideology. The textual structure, the humor of the show, and the popular myth of beauty and the beast work together to encourage viewers to accept patriarchy as a “natural” male trait and trivialize sexism as a laughing matter. Although this study

focuses on sitcoms, it suggests much about the general power of television narratives to reinforce gender roles.

Women and Men in Sitcoms

Several scholars have pointed out the unique gender constellations in U.S. sitcoms. Patricia Mellencamp examines how the situation comedy genre historically served to “contain women” (70). Focusing on two shows from the 1950s, Mellencamp explains how both Gracie (Gracie Allen) on *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* and Lucy on *I Love Lucy* seem to rebel against male dominance, pointing out that Gracie often ignores George (George Burns) and that Lucy is always disobeying Ricky. Women often succeed in the narratives of each episode, as when it is discovered that one of Gracie’s improbable stories is true or when Lucy humiliates Ricky during one of his performances. Despite this, however, Mellencamp finds that “shifts between narrative and comic spectacle,” central characteristics of the sitcom genre, serve to downplay the issue of the “repressive conditions of the 1950s” (73). Thus, the humor in these shows functions to replace female “anger, if not rage, with pleasure” (73).

Despite this discursive containment of women in early sitcoms, it is striking that over time the genre seems to have worked out a peculiar representation of men. Fathers and husbands in situation comedies often play by different rules than men on other kinds of television shows. For example, Muriel Cantor writes, “The dominating, authoritative male, so common in other genres, is rarely found in domestic comedies” (276). According to her, domestic comedies do not feature “macho men” because the major theme of domestic comedies since the 1950s has been “the myth of female dominance and breakdown of male authority” (283). The central reason for this story line might be that women are the target audience of domestic comedies (Cantor 275).

Richard Butsch adds the important category of class to this analysis when he compares the portrayal of working-class fathers and middle-class fathers in situation comedies. He notes that from

the 1950s to the 1990s, the common sitcom working-class father is often an “inept bumbler and even a buffoon” (391). In most working-class sitcoms from this time frame, it is commonplace that the stereotypically stupid and immature protagonist gets himself into a predicament, which his wife helps him solve. Working-class wives are “typically portrayed as more intelligent, rational, sensible, responsible, and mature than their husbands or fathers” (Butsch 391). However, middle-class sitcoms tend to portray successful and mature fathers. If any character on the show becomes the target of humor, it is the wife (Butsch 394).

While Butsch focuses on the consistency in the portrayal of sitcom fathers from the 1950s to the 1990s, Erica Scharrer emphasizes the transformation during this time frame. She argues that sitcom fathers move from being regarded as intellectually superior to being mocked for acting unreasonably (23). She contends that in recent decades, female characters tell more jokes at the expense of their husbands than they did in the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting that women have become the more powerful characters on sitcoms (31). She attributes this change to the decline of the man as the sole breadwinner and explains that husbands became “fair game” (34) for criticism once they had a less crucial economic role in the family.

However, Bonnie Dow, in her research on gender ideology in television, emphasizes the difficulty of challenging patriarchy on television. Dow explains how—even within sitcoms—hegemonic discursive devices are used to protect the dominant patriarchal ideology that portrays seemingly independent, working women on shows such as *Mary Tyler Moore* and *Murphy Brown*. For example, although Mary Richards (*Mary Tyler Moore*) has no actual family members on the show, she serves as both a daughter and mother/wife figure to other characters. Also, Mary’s relationships are limited by their setting in the public and private spheres. Mary’s exchanges with her close female friends are “home-centered” and involve personal issues, while her interactions with men relate mostly to work (Dow, “Hegemony” 268).

More recently, scholars have found a more positive reading, at least occasionally, on gender and television sitcoms. Laura Linder notices significant differences between gender roles when she compares *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1957) to a more recent show, *The Osbournes* (2002). Although she states that the shows share common themes, Linder argues that sitcom fathers have “devolved” into a “less respected position” while sitcom mothers have “evolved toward a more respected position” (70). She concludes that “gender is no longer a signifier of uncontested power in the household; men and women are different, but no longer unequal in the sitcom world” (70).

Lately, there has been a debate amongst feminist media scholars on the

little has changed, even as postfeminist media representations are on the rise. So where do sitcom women stand in the new millennium? How do shows such as *The King of Queens* and *According to Jim* that feature a “mismatched” married couple continue this discourse?

Beauty and the Beast

In the 1950s, television viewers knew that Alice Kramden (Audrey Meadows) was way out of Ralph’s (Jackie Gleason) league in *The Honeymooners*. A decade later, people wondered what Wilma was thinking when she married Fred Flintstone on the 1960s animated series *The Flintstones*. Mismatched television couples are nothing new. However, within the past ten years, there has been a proliferation of these couples on

ed for Life, *George Lopez*, and several other short-lived copycat shows (such as *Quintuplets* and *Father of the Pride*). The most successful and longest-running examples of this trend are *The King of Queens* and *According to Jim*. The fact that they highly resonate with audiences warrants closer investigation.

It Comes Down to the Shorts

Two characters that exemplify the beauty and the beast trend are Doug and Carrie Heffernan on *The King of Queens*. The episodes revolve around Doug (Kevin James), an overweight and immature deliveryman, and his wife, Carrie (Leah Remini), a “spitfire legal secretary,” as they encounter “day-to-day domestic realities” (Sony). The show is set in working-class Queens, New York, where the

[S]cholars warn that postfeminism as played out on television reinscribes patriarchal constellations and stifles the political aspects of feminism.

potential of postfeminist representations to update gender representation and break problematic stereotypes. While some scholars emphasize that characters such as Buffy, Ally McBeal, or the female protagonists of *Friends* and *Sex and the City* have the potential to unwrap past restrictive gender representations, other scholars warn that postfeminism as played out on television reinscribes patriarchal constellations and stifles the political aspects of feminism.¹

Overall, during the last twenty-five years feminist media critics have explained how the portrayal of fathers and men on U.S. situation comedies has evolved and how humor can both contain and empower women on sitcoms. Many scholars argue that even when it appears that women have become more powerful characters on television, hegemonic narrative devices are often used to maintain patriarchal ideology. Some critics say that women and men are no longer “unequal,” while others argue that

U.S. prime-time television, and critics have noticed. In fact, *Esquire* labeled “Fat guys and their hot wives on CBS” the “Least Believable Trend” of 2004 (“Awards”). Matt Feeney points out that ugly/beautiful couples have a long tradition on American sitcoms, however, in the past “the husband was at least shown to compensate” with a nice personality in shows such as *The Bob Newhart Show* or *Family Ties*. Sitcoms today feature husbands who are not only “not studly, but downright fat [...] and ugly on the inside too,” as they tend to be immature and selfish. According to Feeney, these sitcoms, which attract both male and female viewers, are “Rorschach blots” in which “women perhaps identify their own desperation” and “men seem to find sweet, elemental fulfillment.” One could name *Everybody Loves Raymond* as a precursor of this category, too, except that the protagonist is not fat. However, typical shows that use the mismatched constellation are *Still Standing*, *Ground-*

couple lives with Carrie’s “often bizarre” (Sony) father, Arthur (Jerry Stiller). They keep Arthur occupied by hiring a dog walker, Holly (Nicole Sullivan), to take him off their hands a few times each week. Doug frequently escapes to his garage or local pub to get away from his father-in-law and enjoy a few beers with his friends, Spence (Patton Oswalt) and Deacon (Victor Williams), and his cousin, Danny (Gary Valentine).

New episodes of *The King of Queens* aired on CBS from September 1998 through May 2007. The show, which was co-created by Michael Weithorn and David Litt, currently runs in off-network syndication on several channels including TBS. Weithorn recalls having trouble selling the show to writers and executives, who expressed concern that if Doug was just a truck driver, “people [would] find him a loser” (qtd. in “With Blue Collar” 8). Weithorn disagreed, claiming, “[F]or a couple to have their own house, for [the husband] to have

a union job, he's living the American dream" (qtd. in "With Blue Collar" 8). In fact, Weithorn explains, Doug's blue-collar profession (along with his uniform) is an important part of the show's appeal: "I think it comes down to the shorts. [...] If at all possible, we have one scene with [Doug] coming or going from work in every episode, just to remind people that's what he does" (qtd. in "With Blue Collar" 8).

The target audience of *The King of Queens* includes both men and women. Although *Time* magazine critic James Poniewozik maintains that "women watch more prime-time TV and are believed to make more household viewing choices," *The King of Queens* seems to have a special appeal to a male audience. *Variety* critic Ray Richmond writes that "plenty of males will no doubt feel a kindred connection with a character for whom watching a football game on his own big screen TV is heaven" ("King" 46).

Critics seemed to have had doubts about the believability of *The King of Queens* when it premiered on September 21, 1998. Richmond contended that the character of Carrie was "thin and gorgeous and would probably be way too good for [Doug] in real life" ("King" 46). Barry Garron of the *Hollywood Reporter* wrote that it was "hard to fathom the chemistry between the portly Doug and the glamorous Carrie" (38). However, after five successful seasons, Michael Speier of *Daily Variety* admitted that the dynamic between the mismatched couple worked, writing, "[W]hile it's becoming quite the concern that someone as big as [Doug] would really be able to keep a hottie like wife Carrie, [...] that has astutely been worked into the show via diet plot-lines and blubber jokes" (16).

Completing nine successful seasons in 2007, *The King of Queens* was a hit with prime-time audiences and has consistently performed well in off-network syndication (Frankel A2).

Jim Wears the Pants

Another couple that fits the mismatched formula is Cheryl (Courtney Thorne-Smith) and Jim (James Belushi) on *According to Jim*. The show focuses on "macho everyman" (ABC) Jim, who

is happily married to his attractive wife, Cheryl, and with whom he has three children. Jim, the family breadwinner, is a contractor in partnership at a design firm in Chicago with his more-educated architect brother-in-law, Andy (Larry Joe Campbell). Cheryl is smart and sophisticated and "willingly gave up dating corporate guys for a life with a simpler man who makes her laugh" (All Your TV). She has a college degree but sacrificed her career aspirations to be a stay-at-home mother. As Pam Gelman explains, Cheryl is an opinionated and modern woman, always challenging Jim's "traditional way" of doing things. The AOL Television Web site describes Jim as "a couch potato dad and husband trying to achieve picket fence ideals while trying to keep a firm hold on his manhood." Jim often reaffirms his manliness by hanging out and practicing with his six-man blues garage band.

Andy and Dana (Kimberly Williams-Paisley), Cheryl's brother and sister, are also main characters on the show. Aside from being his work partner, Andy is one of Jim's best friends. Andy "doggedly covers for his pal" (ABC) whenever Cheryl is about to catch Jim at one of his schemes. Dana is a high-strung career woman who is vice president at an advertising agency. She seems to be destined for spinsterhood for the first few seasons, but she eventually marries a doctor at the end of season four.

According to Jim premiered on ABC on October 3, 2001, and aired until May 2007. It currently runs in off-network syndication on local and cable channels such as the CW. The show was co-created by Jonathan Stark and Tracy Newman. Richmond maintains in the *Hollywood Reporter* that, as one of the show's executive producers, Belushi "was adamant that his character not be feminized and his wife not wear the pants" ("Comic" S8).

It is no surprise that a show based on these ideals has attracted a male audience. As has *The King of Queens*, *According to Jim* has been successful with the predominantly female prime-time audience and was advertised as a "family-friendly comedy" on ABC's Web site (ABC). However, as the senior vice president of strategic research at

Buena Vista emphasizes, "Looking at the broad-based appeal of the show, it is the male distinguishing demographic that will propel 'Jim' and set it apart" (qtd. in Pursell 13). *According to Jim* has been criticized for following the beauty and the beast trend. Similar to *The King of Queens*, critics eventually admitted that the formula was successful. For example, Pam Gelman comments, "This may not be the first sitcom with this twist, but due to great casting [...] it works."

Feminist Criticism

Patriarchal ideology is so embedded in everyday discourse that it becomes normal to general audiences, and its presence easily goes unnoticed. As Dow points out, "[A]udiences caught in cultural hegemonic patterns may not acknowledge what is happening"; it is the responsibility of critics to analyze the subtleties and the patriarchal ideology on television ("Hegemony" 272). Charlotte Krookke and Anne Scott Sorenson explain that a major focus of media research from a feminist perspective is identifying "the reinstatement of gender in dichotomous and hierarchic setups that may normalize discrimination [...] against women" (78).

In both *The King of Queens* and *According to Jim*, blatant sexism normally is contained by ironic or mocking female rejoinders, and the sexist comments are not meant to be taken seriously. The ideological problem with these shows is that they nevertheless reinforce male dominance to the point where viewers can find it normal and even humorous.

This study of beauty and the beast sitcoms entailed watching the complete fourth season of *The King of Queens* (twenty-five episodes) and twelve episodes from the first season and twelve episodes from the third of *According to Jim*. Although the seasons of each series were selected based on convenience, the number of episodes within each season was large enough to confirm that this study's observations were, in fact, "trends" that appeared throughout different episodes. In order to verify further that these observations were not exclusive to specific seasons of the shows, two or three episodes from other seasons of both shows were watched.

To narrow the focus of this analysis, this article highlights one representative episode of each series that best demonstrates the gender role patterns exhibited by the sitcom. These episodes revolve around a conflict between the two main characters, the husband and wife. In the “Bun Dummy” episode of *The King of Queens*, Carrie starts wearing her hair in a bun, but Doug does not like the new hairstyle. When he tells her that she cannot wear the bun to his high school reunion, she gets angry and says that she is not going. In “The Truck” episode of *According to Jim*, Jim loses his truck in an arm-wrestling match with a hustler at a bar. Cheryl tells him that he needs to get the truck back so that he can take his daughter’s art project to school. Jim, a self-proclaimed man of honor, refuses to beg for the truck to be returned.

Sexism: A Laughing Matter?

It has been an ongoing debate of media scholars whether mediated humor can successfully undermine oppressive ideologies such as racism or sexism. Many scholars are not hopeful about the potential of comedies to challenge problematic representations.² The following analysis supports this caution but adds to this scholarship a more detailed explanation of how specific narrative structures and discursive elements allow viewers to find shows funny, even while the shows sustain the repressive character of U.S. prime-time television. How exactly is humor used to reinforce traditional gender constellations?

As the analysis of these sitcoms demonstrates, sexism in its most blatant, open, and irrational forms—as exemplified by the foolish claims of male uniqueness by the male protagonists—can be laughed at as the aberrations of buffoons (whether quasi-working-class Doug or middle-class Jim). Here the sitcoms connect to the long-established formula of sitcoms that privileges the perspective of female viewers by making fun of men or providing a humorous outlet for nontraditional gender role constellations. However, these shows also connect to another tradition of prime-time sitcoms—that of discursive containment. Sexism is a laughing matter as long as overall male dominance is not questioned.

An incongruous story line (laughing at sexism while supporting patriarchy) becomes plausible because the creators use an intricate narrative strategy that privileges narrative fidelity over probability. Narrative probability relates to the “question of whether or not a story [is] free of contradictions” (Fisher 349). According to this definition, neither of these series exhibits narrative probability. Thus, it seems that as inherently storytelling beings, viewers should be quick to realize that these stories do not make sense. However, in these cases, narrative fidelity, which measures if a story “represents accurate assertions about reality or rings true with what you know to be true” (Foss 340) takes precedence. The characters in *According to Jim* and *The King of Queens* encounter real-life situations to which the audience can relate. In a given episode, they might deal with irritating in-laws, face egotistical bosses, or discipline spoiled children. The relatable characters and situations make the shows seem realistic overall. If viewers do not question every aspect of the show separately, they may accept the portrayal of gender roles as also true to life.

In each case, because narrative fidelity gains primacy over probability, the inconsistency of the narrative elements is easily overlooked. By following the jokes and laughing along, viewers may lose track of the overall message of these stories. Despite inviting the audience in its laugh track to laugh at outright sexist comments, a more subtle patriarchal ideology is normalized and male dominance remains unquestioned. The following sections demonstrate how this discursive logic plays out in specific episodes.

The King of Carrie

In a typical *King of Queens* episode, what Seymour Chatman calls the “satellite narratives” or minor events of the plot (qtd. in Rybacki and Rybacki 113) portray Carrie as dominant: she orders Doug around, threatens him, corrects his mistakes, and makes fun of his obesity. Conversely, the “kernel narratives” or major plot events (Rybacki and Rybacki 118) reveal that Doug is in charge. Doug routinely goes against what Carrie asks of him, and then he lies or tricks her, not respecting her

enough to tell her the truth. In the end, Carrie feels guilty, admits she is wrong, or easily forgives Doug so that he never has to feel bad about his behavior.

In the “Bun Dummy” episode, several satellite narratives demonstrate Carrie’s dominance over Doug. Carrie’s superior looks are often emphasized by the jokes that she makes about Doug’s laziness and weight. In one scene, she tells him that she must not have seen a movie he is talking about because, unlike him, she does not watch “112 hours of TV a week.” Seconds later, after he makes fun of her hairstyle, she points out that he might like her bun better if it “had powdered sugar on it.”

There are also many instances when Carrie’s intellectual superiority is stressed in this episode. In one scene, when Doug jokes about Carrie’s bun and says, “We’re going to the movies, not the library,” Carrie quickly snaps back at him, “Like you know what goes on in a library.” In a later scene, after Carrie defends her bun by saying that it is the preferred look in Spain, Doug tells her that she might have well wear a sombrero, too. In response, Carrie says, “That’s Mexico, you friggin’ idiot.”

Although Carrie appears dominant in these minor plot events, the kernel narratives within the “Bun Dummy” episode show that Doug tricks Carrie, that she submits to his requests, and that he is correct about the whole situation. Instead of directly confronting Carrie about his problem with her hairstyle, Doug pays their friend Holly to tell Carrie that she does not like it. When Holly’s opinion has no effect, Doug tells Carrie directly that she cannot wear the bun to his class reunion. Carrie refuses at first, but she gives in after Doug’s friend Deacon tells Carrie that her bun is “ass ugly.” She attends the reunion with her hair down, and Doug parades her around like a trophy wife. Believing that Carrie took the bun out because of him, Doug suggests that she also get rid of a dress that he hates. Carrie gets angry and reveals that she only wore her hair down because Deacon didn’t like it. Carrie and Doug argue, and she rebels by putting her hair back up in the bun. During the reunion, a picture is put up on a projection screen in memory

of the school librarian, who is wearing a bun that looks strikingly similar to Carrie's. Doug immediately looks at his wife, who admits defeat by putting her hair back down. This conclusion demonstrates that Doug was right about the bun and that Carrie should have listened to him in the first place.

The characterization in *The King of Queens* also reveals how gender roles are portrayed on the show. For example, several characters represent nontraditional gender roles. Spence and Holly exhibit very different qualities from Doug and Carrie. Spence, a cultured and sensitive "mama's boy," offers a stark contrast to his best friend Doug, a sports fanatic and "man's man." Holly, a spontaneous and independent single woman, represents a different female role than the more predictable and married Carrie. Signifi-

and Holly make brief appearances. In the few lines that they have, both characters are portrayed as peculiar and unhappy. When Doug mentions their upcoming high school reunion, Spence says he is not going because he does not want to see the hottest teacher in their school, with whom he had a "very intense relationship." Doug, joking about Spence's constant failure in relationships, says that the only way someone would believe that story is if he said the relationship was with Miss Berman, "the weird home-ec[onomics] teacher with the limp." At the end of the episode, viewers find out that it was in fact Miss Berman with whom Spence had the relationship. Spence had been lying to avoid looking weak.

Similarly, Holly is cast as an outsider in the "Bun Dummy" episode.

While interacting with other characters, she is generally doing some sort of household chore. The majority of her interactions are with family members (either Doug or Arthur). When Carrie does leave the house, it is usually to go to work, run errands, or go to the gym. Although some scenes feature Carrie at the office or talking about work, she is usually portrayed as dissatisfied or unhappy in these scenes. Doug, on the other hand, is frequently shown outside of the house, either at work or with his friends. Even at his house, his friends are often there with him, playing poker or watching sports.

In the "Bun Dummy" episode, Doug demonstrates his incapability at handling social situations when he goes to his high school reunion. Before Carrie arrives, he struggles to carry on

[C]haracters that deviate from traditional gender roles are portrayed as unhappy and pathetic.

cantly, these characters that deviate from traditional gender roles are portrayed as unhappy and pathetic. Holly, whose closest companions are canines, often puts herself down and appears lonely and depressed. Spence is also portrayed as pitiable; he is routinely mocked by Doug and his friends for his "wussy" behavior and lack of success with "the ladies." The portrayal of nontraditional males and females as dissatisfied serves to emphasize the importance of filling the traditional gender roles, as do Doug and Carrie.

The character of Carrie's father, Arthur Spooner, underlines the traditional gender roles filled by Carrie and Doug. Although the couple has no children, Arthur fills that void with his infantile behavior. Carrie frequently acts like a mother to Arthur, cooking for him and disciplining him. In contrast, Doug is annoyed by and often negligent of Arthur, leaving Carrie with most of the "parental" responsibilities.

Although Arthur is not featured in the "Bun Dummy" episode, both Spence

One example is the scene in which she comes to the house to get Arthur for his walk, and Doug informs her that Arthur is on vacation. Holly responds that she must have missed his call because she was "pretty hungover." She then agrees to talk to Carrie for Doug in exchange for money. She explains that she is "low on cash" because she has recently "gone a little crazy with the lotto tickets." Whenever Holly appears or is mentioned in the episode, she is portrayed as pathetic, as either a gambler or a drunk.

The setting of *The King of Queens* is another revealing narrative element that positions men as dominant in the public sphere, while women are confined to the private sphere. Typically, when the couple is in public, Doug is shown as incapable. He is often rude and inappropriate, an embarrassment to his sophisticated and mature wife. Despite this, Carrie is mostly confined to the private sphere, while Doug is more often shown in the public and professional sphere. In most scenes, Carrie is in the house.

conversations without embarrassing himself. Although Carrie appears more capable in the public sphere, the rest of the episode demonstrates that Carrie belongs in the private sphere and that Doug belongs in the public sphere. Carrie's confinement is emphasized in two scenes in which she is performing household duties: paying bills and taking out recyclables. Carrie only talks about her life in the public sphere two times in the "Bun Dummy" episode. One instance is during a scene in which Doug and Spence are in the garage. Carrie comes in to tell him that she is leaving the house, but, as usual, it is only to go to the gym. Another instance is in the opening segment, when Carrie talks about her day at work. She complains to Doug about how one of her coworkers caused a paper jam that ruined her entire day. In this scene, Carrie is portrayed as unhappy, a recurring characteristic of scenes involving Carrie's professional life.

Overall, the plot, characterization, and setting of *The King of Queens* are

contradictory in their portrayal of gender roles. Although the satellites demonstrate Carrie's physical and intellectual superiority over Doug, the kernels and main message of the episode have Carrie submit to his dominant behavior. In addition, though nontraditional gender roles are represented by Spence and Holly, their characters are unhappy and constantly being ridiculed. Furthermore, while Doug is portrayed as incompetent in public settings, he is shown in the public sphere more often than Carrie.

According to Men

According to Jim follows a strikingly similar narrative structure. In a typical episode, the satellites emphasize that Cheryl, like Carrie on *The King of Queens*, is "too good" for Jim. She is wittier, smarter, more competent, and more attractive. In several episodes, minor characters specifically comment that Cheryl deserves a better husband. With both Cheryl and her sister Dana regularly making fun of him, Jim is the target of more jokes than Cheryl. In addition, Jim is usually the one making a fool of himself. He always has outlandish ideas and makes irrational comments, while Cheryl normally offers reasonable opinions. Minor plot events also demonstrate that Jim is sexist. Many of his viewpoints indicate that he believes men are superior to women. In most cases, Cheryl or Dana responds to his sexist comments with jokes or insults. Despite Cheryl's intellectual and physical superiority, as well as her apparent disapproval of Jim's sexism, many of the kernels (in particular those that involve the resolution of a conflict between Jim and Cheryl) show Cheryl giving in and submitting to Jim and his sexist attitude.

In "The Truck" episode, both Cheryl's good looks and Jim's average appearance are emphasized during minor plot events. In one scene, the boys who work at the supermarket bring Cheryl and Dana's bags to the minivan and trip over themselves as they try to talk to the two women. After the boys leave, Dana asks Cheryl, "Isn't it great being pretty?" Later, when Jim and Andy are in a bar, the man who eventually hustles Jim calls him Fred Flintstone. Jim responds, "I'm gonna ignore what you just said

because you're drunk and because of my vague resemblance to Fred Flintstone." The same man later refers to Cheryl as Wilma, reemphasizing the difference in Jim and Cheryl's appearances.

Jim's immaturity and foolishness are also emphasized by minor plot events in "The Truck." In one of the first scenes, Jim tells Cheryl that the only thing he could find in the refrigerator was "really bad Alfredo sauce." She promptly responds, "Jim, that was paste!" In a later scene, after Cheryl finds out that Jim lost his truck in a bar bet and tells him that he needs to get it back, Jim says he will think of a plan, but he appears to need a lot of concentration in order to think. He tells Cheryl to leave and yells, "I can't do it while you're watching!"

Many satellites in this episode demonstrate Jim's sexism. When Cheryl tells Jim that she is going to call the mechanic about getting his truck back (after he, like Doug, chooses to lie and tells her that the truck is at the shop), Jim explains to her that cars are not her "department." He says that "the kids, the bills, the house, the social calendar, and all the yard work" are Cheryl's responsibilities, but "car stuff" and "turning the clocks backward and forward as needed" are his jobs. Dana, disgusted by the fact that Jim expects Cheryl to take on practically all the domestic responsibilities, sarcastically says to Jim, "Geez, when do you find time to scratch yourself?"

In a different scene, Cheryl tells Jim that she went to the bar and got his truck back. Jim becomes angry and says he has to return the truck because it is a matter of honor. Cheryl responds that she does not understand how Jim can inconvenience his whole family just to protect his pride. He quickly corrects her and says that it is not pride but honor and that she would "know the difference if [she] didn't shave her legs." Jim explains that he had to accept the bet after the man in the bar called him a woman. In rebuttal, Cheryl reassures him that he is not a woman and then shouts, "Because it took a woman to get your truck back!"

Although Cheryl and Dana seem to disagree with Jim's sexist ways in these minor events, Cheryl submits to Jim's beliefs at major points in the plot. As

usual, in this episode she is the one to give in so that the couple can settle their differences. For example, in one of the final scenes, Jim tries to explain again to Cheryl why he cannot ask the hustler to return his truck. He says, "Without honor I'm not gonna be the man that I want my daughters to see, and I'm definitely not going to be the man you married [. . .] and, baby, I am a man." Cheryl responds, "I don't get it, but I've been married to you long enough to know you're not gonna change, so you have my full support." She is right. Jim is not going to change. In the next scene, when Cheryl criticizes Jim's plan to play a game of pool to win back his truck, he responds, "This is my plan. This is men's business. Just stay out of it."

As do characters in *The King of Queens*, characters in *According to Jim* represent both traditional and nontraditional gender roles. Cheryl's brother and sister, Andy and Dana, present a contrast to Jim and Cheryl's traditional roles as breadwinner and housewife. Dana is single (until the end of season four) and has a successful business career. She differs from her feminine sister, Cheryl, in that she likes to play sports, watch games on television, and drink with Jim and Andy. As Spence does for Doug in *The King of Queens*, Andy fills the role of Jim's sidekick. He is an architect and more educated than Jim. However, like Spence, Andy always seems to be the butt of jokes. He is also more sensitive than Jim. Andy's vulnerable side is most frequently revealed when his two sisters are pushing him around.

Although Dana's and Andy's characters offer alternative gender roles, they are depicted as inferior to Cheryl's and Jim's traditional roles. Like Holly and Spence on *The King of Queens*, Dana and Andy are often portrayed as lonely and discontented with their lives. In almost every episode, Dana's lack of a boyfriend is mentioned at least once. Usually Dana mopes and complains that she is lonely, and sometimes she is shown drowning her sorrow with a drink.

Similarly, Andy is rarely seen having success at romance. Jim is often embarrassed at Andy's unmanly behavior. He usually responds by making fun of or yelling at Andy. Andy's softer side is not

only emphasized in comparison to Jim, but also in comparison to Dana. In most of the interactions between the two, Dana is the tough one and Andy is the weak one. Overall, it appears that Andy and Dana are unhappy with their own lives. They spend so much time at Jim and Cheryl's house that it seems as though they would prefer to live like them.

In multiple scenes of "The Truck" episode, Andy's sensitivity and failure with women are emphasized. In one of the first scenes, Andy is shown going food shopping with his sisters. He acts tough and makes fun of the boys who work at the supermarket because they have pimples. Minutes later, Dana and Cheryl force Andy to tell them what happened to Jim's truck by twisting his nipples. He whimpers with pain and tells his sisters what happened at the bar. While telling the story, he claims that a random woman came up and kissed him in the bar. Dana automatically assumes that he is lying and asks him to "stick to what really happened." He admits that, in reality, he said to the woman, "Come here, sweetheart," and she responded, "Drop dead." When the sisters find out that Andy was an accomplice in another one of Jim's schemes, they drive away without him. He begs them to stop and says, "It's going to get dark in three hours [...] no!" The supermarket workers watch him fall as he chases the minivan. One boy says to him, "Not so tough without your sisters, are you?"

In another, rather homophobic, scene, Jim yells at Andy when he does not act like the "man's man" that Jim thinks he should be. When the two men are leaving the house, Andy slaps Jim's bottom. Jim is infuriated and says, "Unless I'm scoring a touchdown, hitting a home run, or I ask you to, that is not okay."

The setting of *According to Jim* also reinforces Jim's and Cheryl's traditional gender roles. As is Doug, Jim tends to be portrayed as inappropriate and embarrassing in social situations. Cheryl, like Carrie, is much more mature than her husband. Despite this, Cheryl is shown primarily with family members in the private sphere, while Jim is more often with friends and in the public sphere. Usually Cheryl only leaves the house to go shopping or drive the children somewhere. When she is

shown in public for other reasons, she is usually portrayed as out of place. Jim, on the other hand, is frequently seen outside of the house: working, causing trouble with Andy, or rehearsing with his band.

In almost every scene of "The Truck," Jim either enters the house at the beginning of the scene or leaves the house at the end of it. He is shown at a bar with Andy twice. In contrast, most scenes involving Cheryl place her in the home, whether she is making a papier-mâché bear with Dana and the children or serving dinner to them. The three times when Cheryl is shown outside of the house during the episode, she is with family members: driving the children, shopping with her siblings, and going with Dana to the bar to find Jim. In the latter scene, Jim, expecting his wife to be at home, is surprised to see her. The first thing he says is, "Cheryl, what are you doing here?" Cheryl is outside of the home for a reason other than to fulfill her housewife duties, and therefore is portrayed as out of place.

Overall, the plot, characterization, and setting of *According to Jim* present incongruous representations of gender. Although the fact that Cheryl is too good for Jim is regularly mentioned, and Jim's sexist attitude and immaturity are emphasized and laughed at in the satellites, the kernels reveal that Cheryl is accepting of Jim's dominant behavior. Also, while Dana and Andy represent alternative gender roles, both are portrayed as inferior to characters who are more traditional. Furthermore, even though Jim makes a fool of himself in public, he is frequently shown in the public sphere, while Cheryl is more often shown in the private sphere.

What's So Funny about Patriarchy?

In both shows, minor plot satellites point out the wife's physical and intellectual dominance over her husband by showing her threatening, yelling, or making fun of him. However, the plot kernels or the dominant messages of the plot show that the husband is really the one in charge. He consistently challenges what the wife says and sneaks around behind her back. Most of the time, moreover, the wife ends up feeling guilty, forgiving the husband, and submitting to his dominant behavior, even though she has done

nothing wrong. Even when the husband is shown to be inept, the wife accepts his irrational actions and opinions on major issues. It seems that the wife gives in to the husband in the major plot kernel at the end of most episodes.

Nontraditional gender roles are often represented by secondary characters who are close friends or extended family members. Some of these characters are even shown to have impressive careers. However, they are depicted as childlike, weak, dissatisfied with their lives, and ultimately unhappy—and they are consistently laughed at. The problematic use of secondary characters harks back to a much older story line on prime-time television. As Jane Connelly Loeb explains in her analysis of the television series *thirtysomething*, characters in nontraditional gender roles in that show lead "erratic, destructive, and neurotic lives" (258), thus reinforcing traditional gender expectations. Similarly, in both analyzed shows many story lines connected to secondary characters also support a patriarchal setup. The continuously featured problems of the softer, feminized sidekicks, Spence and Andy, stand as a warning of female emancipation gone too far.

Furthermore, the setting positions the husbands in the public realm, reinforcing the idea that the public sphere is the "man's place" and the "woman's place" is in the home. When women do appear in public, they are out of place. Even when the husbands are represented as completely incompetent, the wives still submit to their judgment to save face in public.

These findings contradict Cantor's observation, quoted earlier, that authoritative males are seldom seen in sitcoms. This study suggests that macho men customarily appear in sitcoms, at least those featuring mismatched couples. The conclusions also maintain Scharrer's suggestion that sitcom fathers have become increasingly more foolish over the years (23). However, while Scharrer notes an increase in the number of powerful women on television sitcoms, this study reveals that these women are not as powerful as they first appear. While the female characters may be portrayed as smarter and more respectable, their apparent superiority is eclipsed by the overall patriarchal themes of the

[T]he stories resolve in such a way that even if the men admit their failings, they never have to change [...].

shows. Although women in the real world and on other television shows have made serious progress over the years, Carrie and Cheryl remain stuck in the male-dominated sitcom world. This analysis challenges the suggestion made by Linder that male and female sitcom characters are “no longer unequal” (70). As does Dow’s and Loeb’s research, this study illustrates that no matter how independent and intelligent the female characters are, other elements, such as setting and characterization, can still contain them in traditional gender roles.

Thus, in these shows the comedy is based on the premise that the husbands do outlandish, sexist, incompetent, and stupid things that are based on their traditional ideas about masculinity (such as not taking care of their children as promised, forgetting their wives’ birthdays, or betting away their truck because someone insulted their manhood). In response, wives make jokes to demonstrate that they are wrong, stupid, and sexist. Nevertheless, the stories resolve in such a way that even if the men admit their failings, they never have to change: their understanding of masculinity and their family roles is never called into question, just their quirky and maddening behaviors, which get reproduced every week.

The women of these sitcoms are prime examples of what could be called being in a postfeminist trap. As Dow importantly argues, postfeminism on television wrongly presumes that “second-wave feminism [...] leveled the playing field so that what contemporary feminists see as

evidence of continuing oppression [...] is really an expression of what women want rather than an expression of the continuing constraints on women’s options and identities” (*Prime-Time* 198). Perhaps women will never be able to progress on television because it is already assumed that they are where they want to be. In these two cases, the women reflect a somewhat exasperated acceptance of traditional gender constellations—as long as extreme sexist edges are kept in check. Moreover, the only female alternatives offered in the sitcoms present dire consequences—being alone or socially inept, as exemplified by the female sidekicks Dana and Holly. Acceptance of these situations is further encouraged by the fact that the male protagonists might be buffoons at times, but they remain likable characters.

As mentioned earlier, these shows are part of a current decade-long trend on television. The main contribution here is to clarify the textual strategies used to mask a repressive ideology. The representations in these shows also relate to much earlier depictions of fathers—especially working-class fathers—in sitcoms (see Butsch; Scharrer) and other programs (see Linder). In fact, *The King of Queens* even uses this generic connection as a self-referential plot idea: the “Inner Tube” episode has Doug dreaming that he and Carrie are Ralph and Alice Kramden, the mismatched married couple on *The Honeymooners*.

Yet beyond the media context, one should not overlook another major factor: the economic success of this constella-

tion. According to Jim’s executive producer, Jeffrey Hodes, describes Jim as “a guy who isn’t afraid to say, ‘I make the money, and this is the way it’s gonna be’” (qtd. in Richmond, “Comic” S8), a comment that demonstrates that traditional gendering is an intrinsic part of the show’s market positioning. Similarly, the fact that co-creator Weithorn calls *The King of Queens* a “domestic comedy in the classic *Honeymooners* tradition” (qtd. in “With Blue Collar” 8) positions traditional masculinity as a branding device. Sexist story lines, then, become commodified nostalgic packages connecting viewers to “better” (television) times.

Many television scholars have argued that in a sitcom the power is with those who make the jokes; the characters who are laughed at hold the undesirable position or function as scapegoats. What is considered common sense and acceptable normality remains in the position of those characters who are initiating the jokes. However, the narrative strategies of these sitcoms demonstrate that the use of humor in sitcoms can be more complicated. Although these shows have the wives making the jokes and the audiences (or laugh track) laughing at the sexism and foolishness of their husbands in many scenes, the “beasts” get ritually redeemed at the end of every episode. Humor does not become an emancipatory force with the power to undermine sexism. Instead, comedy is used to mollify patriarchy and trivialize everyday moments of feminist empowerment. Having this gender relationship played out in

[T]he only female alternatives offered in the sitcoms present dire consequences—being alone or socially inept [...].

sitcoms as opposed to dramas or other TV genres is especially troubling and belittles the impact of sexism on everyday life. As the male protagonists remain likable characters, sexism is reduced to only a momentary digression, easily laughed off, as opposed to part of a systemic repressive ideology.

The fact that these shows are framed in a long-established popular culture myth of beauty and the beast reinforces this ideology. The beauty (e.g., Jane) commonly "liberates" the beast (e.g., Tarzan) by finally accepting him "as is." Attempts by the beauty to bring the beast to her environment fail. In an epic struggle between nature (essential maleness) and civilization (refined femininity), nature will prevail. It is up to the beauty (woman) to come around and accept the beast's (man's) true or authentic self. The sitcom version of this popular myth plays out the same storyline: In the resolution of the struggle between patriarchy and feminism, it remains the task of the female protagonists to acquiesce to the "natural" force of patriarchy.

NOTES

1. For this debate see Rockler; Ouelette; Owen; and Dow, *Prime-Time*; see also Moseley and Read.

2. See Schulman; see also Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin.

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